

Lidia Sudyka & Cezary Galewicz
(Jagiellonian University, Kraków)

**The eightfold gymnastics of mind:
a preliminary report on the idea and tradition of *aṣṭāvadhāna***

SUMMARY: The present paper stems from a field study initiated in 2006-2008 in Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. It aims at drawing a preliminary image of the hitherto unstudied art of *avadhāna* (Skt.: 'attentivness, concentration') of which *aṣṭāvadhāna* (literally: eightfold concentration) seems to be a better known variety. The paper presents a selection of epigraphic and literary evidence thereof and sketches a historical and social background of *avadhāna* to go with a report on the present position of its tradition of performance as well as prevailing set of rules.

KEYWORDS: literary cultures, performing arts, *aṣṭāvadhāna*, *avadhāna*, intellectual literary games, *Kāmasūtra*, *kaviḡoṣṭhi*

Foreword

(by Cezary Galewicz)

Rather than an outcome of a completed project, this presentation is meant to be an introduction into a presumably new research area situated on the crossroads of literary studies and social anthropology. It concerns a tradition of a particular type of literary gaming known by the name of *avadhāna* (Skt. 'attention, concentration'), its history, geographical and cultural location as well as its present status. To our best knowledge, the living art and tradition of *avadhāna* have remained

so far outside the focus of academic attention. For this reason at least, the present paper is a pioneering study. It addresses also a more general problem of how to do field research and how to describe living or revived performing traditions within literary cultures of South Asia. The initial stage of the research project referred to in the paper consisted of three short field studies undertaken in 2006-2008¹ in Karnataka and Andhra and it produced mostly video documentation and interviews with the insiders. These were coupled with the search for literary and epigraphic sources of the concept and tradition of the literary show-off named *avadhāna*. For the time being, the outcome of this research remains rather fragmentary, awaiting a more systematic field study as well as a more consistent methodological framing.² Although exponents of the art of *avadhāna* can be seen today on Youtube, its idea runs the risk of being grossly misunderstood if not backed with a reconstruction of a wider socio-historical background.

I. Introduction. Literary Games in Ancient India

(by Lidia Sudyka)

Prince Harivāhana entered the hall with a few dear friends and for a long while stood observing the intricate design of the building. His curiosity satisfied, he seated himself on a large floral couch as if invited to do so by the humming bees attracted by the fragrance of his face. After he was seated, many princes were ushered in by the door keeper. Among them were artists, adepts in sciences of all kinds, poets, orators, critics of poetry and experts in legendary and historical narratives. There were others who were interested in compositions like tales, historical biographies and dramas. Those proficient in explaining the various techniques of erotics were also there. They were handsome to look at and colourfully and tastefully dressed.

¹ This study was made possible due to a Polish Ministry of Science and Higher Education grant.

² During its first presentation, this paper was accompanied by a fifteen-minute video documentary aiming to give the audience an idea of what (*aṣṭa*)*avadhāna* might look like and who the contemporary Avadhānis might be.

They were soft-spoken and endowed with cheery natures. Some other royal personages of the same age as the prince, who could render befitting service on such occasions, also presented themselves.

When all were seated properly, the poets' meet began and prince Harivāhana started speaking, quoting aphorisms and narrating stories. Many beautiful and varied interpretations of poetry came to light during the deliberations. Riddles that were famous in the corridors of the learned were read. Different kinds of questions and answers that were sure to bewilder the less intelligent were pondered over. Songs suffused with emotion were discussed. Conundrums wherein syllables or words had to be guessed at by the hearers were explained. Dullheads and charlatans who contemplated for long without any tangible results were laughed at. Flawed utterances of the uneducated were held up to ridicule, raising the curiosity of the students.³

This interesting and detailed description of *kavigoṣṭhi* or *sabhā* comes from the *Tilakamañjari* authored by Dhanapāla (10th century A.D.). As is believed he was a court poet of the Dhāra kings Muñja, then Bhoja.⁴ Thanks to Dhanapāla we are able to taste the atmosphere of a poets' meet – this part and parcel of pan-Indian literary culture.⁵ One of the form to test the abilities and intelligence of the poets-contestants and participants in scholarly debates was that of solving riddles, completing unfinished verses, etc.

One of the earliest textual evidence mentioning some of such literary games, and also the branches of knowledge useful to perform those games, is provided by the *Kāmasūtra*. One can find them among the 64 *kalās*,

³ Transl. Nagaraja Rao (Sharma 2000: 572).

⁴ Some other scholars claim that Dhanapāla was patronised by Sīyaka.

⁵ Rājaśekhara (10th century AD) also testifies to that and in chapter 10 of his *Kāvyamīmāṃsa* gives some information as to where the debates of poets and grammarians were held in the past and also instructs how to construct and arrange an assembly hall for evaluating poetic compositions (*kāvya-parīkṣāyai*). The Sanskrit poets, for example, should sit to the north of the king's throne whereas the poet who is able to compose in many languages may sit wherever he wants (Rai 2000: 118-120). The legendary *kavigoṣṭhis* held at King Bhoja's court were mentioned in different works, such as the *Prabandhacintāmaṇi* of Merutuṅga or *Bhojaprabandha* of Ballāla (about the latter work see: Paṇucha 2010).

i.e. arts and skills.⁶ These are *prahelikā* (composing and solving riddles), *pratimālā* (a game in which one party recites a verse and the opposite party recites another), *durvācakayogā* (reciting verses difficult to repeat), *pustakavācana* (recitation from books), *nāṭakākhyāyikādarśana* (staging plays and stories), *kāvyaśamasyāpūraṇa* (filling out incomplete verse riddles), *dhāraṇamāṭṛkā* (memory training), *saṃpāṭhya* (game of group recitation), *mānasī kāvyakriyā* (improvising poetry), *chandojñāna* (knowledge of prosody) and *kriyākalpa* (knowledge of poetics).

The set of these terms is repeated in several sources enumerating the 64 arts. For instance *Śrīmad Bhagavatam* in Canto X, chapter 45, reads that Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma learned 64 arts, among them those under consideration.

Let us examine then the terms closely associated with the practise of literary games.

Praheḷikā

According to Sanskrit dictionaries the word *prahelikā* means: “enigma, riddle, puzzling question”. This general expression acquires different shades of meaning while studying various sources.

Jayamaṅgalā of Yaśodhara Indrapāda (ca. 13th century A.D.), a commentary on the *Kāmasūtra*, informs about the art of *prahelikā* in short:

Kāmasūtram I, 3

*praheliketi /lokapraṭītā, krīḍārthā vādārthā ca*⁷

Well known in the world, suitable for play and contest, it is *prahelikā*.⁸

⁶ A lot has been written about *kalās* in different sources discussing fine arts, education and social life in ancient India, etc.; in our case suffice to mention V. Raghavan’s *Festivals, Sports and Pastimes of India* – a source most linked with the subject of the present article – which mentions some of the sixty-four *kalās* in terms of intellectual diversions or pastimes and games.

⁷ Durgaprasad 1891: 37.

⁸ All the translations quoted in that part of the article are mine (LS) unless otherwise stated.

In the *Kāvyaṭaṅkāra* of Bhāmaha (c. 6th century A.D.) the *prahelikā* is discussed in the passage devoted to *yamaka* ('doubled') – a figure in which a part of a verse is repeated, each time producing a different meaning.⁹ It is said:

Kāvyaṭaṅkāra II. 19

nānādhātvarthagambhīrā yamakavyapadeśinī |
*prahelikā sā hy uditā rāmaśarmācyutottare ||*¹⁰

Praheḷikā which is called *yamaka* is charged with different meanings of the roots. It is exemplified in the *Acyutottara* by Rāmaśarmā.¹¹

There is no general definition of the *prahelikā* in the *Kāvyaḍarśa* of Daṇḍin (7th century A.D.), although he gives sixteen varieties of it and mentions fourteen other erroneous types (*duṣṭapraheḷikā*). They are discussed in a separate section just after *yamakas*. Edwin Gerow while explaining the position of *prahelikās* as poetic figures mentions that according to Daṇḍin they “serve only as recreation for scholars or critics, and perhaps can be used to demonstrate the prowess of one writer over another – a sort of verbal jujitsu”.¹² What Daṇḍin says himself is as follows:

Kāvyaḍarśa III. 97

krīḍāgoṣṭhīvinodeṣu tajjñair ākīrṇamantraṇe /
*paravyāmoḥane cāpi sopavogāḥ prahelikāḥ //*¹³

Praheḷikās are used as the entertainment at the sportive meetings; those who know them employ them as a means of communication in the crowded places and also for confusing others.

⁹ Gerow 1971: 223.

¹⁰ Naganatha Sastry 1991: 28.

¹¹ Bhāmaha refers to Rāmaśarman also in II.58 analysing his verse as an example of *upamāne adhipapadatvam* (a case of excess in the *upamāna*). The works of this author are not preserved.

¹² Gerow 1971: 210.

¹³ Böhrtlingk 1890: 106.

All the *prahelikās* enumerated by Daṇḍin are different types of conundrums in which, for instance, the solution is hidden by a grammatical device (*ubhayachanna*¹⁴), or by a series of archaic or irregular words (*pramuṣita*), or rearranging the words of the statement (*vyutkrānta*), etc. The examples of different kinds of *prahelikās* in the *Kāvyaḍarśa* were carefully explained by Ludwik Sternbach in his book *Indian Riddles. A Forgotten Chapter in the History of Sanskrit Literature*. He also mentions some other treatises on poetics and the *alaṃkāra* section of the *Viṣṇudharmottarapurāṇa* as discussing such a phenomenon.¹⁵

Also the *Agnipurāṇa*, in its portions devoted to poetics, defines the *prahelikā* (AP 342. 22). It is introduced as a figure belonging to the sevenfold *citra* group, which encompasses puzzles, riddles and other literary games, such as *praśna*, *gupta*, *cyuta*, *datta*, *cyuta-datta* and *samasyā* (AP 342. 20). As Edwin Gerow points out, the *Agnipurāṇa* compiler does not hesitate to call this word play by the name of poetry. Some authors “treat of it because of its obvious function to entertain the same audience for whom the poetry was destined and also because in some manner it does demonstrate the virtuosity of the ‘poet’ who wrote it”.¹⁶

What *Agnipurāṇa* exactly says on the subject is as follows:

Agnipurāṇa, 342.20

*goṣṭhyāṃ kutūhalādhyāyī vāgbandhaś citram ucyate /
praśnaḥ prahelikā guptaṃ cyutadatte tathobhayam /
samasyā sapta tadbhedā nānārthasānuযোগataḥ* //¹⁷

The *citra* is said to be a composition of words which excites curiosity in a learned assembly. From the examination of various meanings, seven varieties of it [arise]: *praśna*, *prahelikā*, *gupta*, *cyuta*, *datta*, combined *cyuta-datta* and *samasyā*.

¹⁴ “[A] riddle in which both (the “container” and the “contained”) are hidden” – as according to the etymology Sternbach describes this type (Sternbach 1975: 49).

¹⁵ Sternbach 1975: 51.

¹⁶ Gerow 1971: 175-176.

¹⁷ Bhattacharya 1976: 165.

It is worth pointing out that the meaning of the technical term *citra* cannot be explain here as “picture” or “picturesque”.¹⁸ Evidently only the interpretation of the term as “striking” or “causing surprise” encompasses all the enumerated *śabdālaṃkāras* or embellishments of sound.

Rudraṭa counts *prahelikā* among six games¹⁹ (*krīḍā*) and distinguishes them from *citra*. They are neither poetry, nor the embellishment of poetry even.²⁰ He mentions these games only because the circles of intellectuals are so fond of them. In his *Kāvyaḷaṅkāra* the term *citra* corresponds to the notion of *carmen figuratum*, while the *Agnipurāṇa* text places *carmina figurata* among *duṣkaras*:

Agnipurāṇa, V342.28

duḥkhena kṛtam atyarthaṃ kavisāmarthyasūcakam /
duṣkaram nīrasatve 'pi vidagdhānām mahotsavaḥ /
nīyamāc ca vikalpāc ca bandhāc ca bhavati tridhā //

The Duṣkara (Difficult), constructed with very great difficulty, is indicative of the poet's ability, and in spite of tastelessness produces great delight in clever persons. It is threefold form the Niyama, the Vikalpa and the Bandha.²¹

Among these three devices ***bandha*** and ***nīyama*** will be of interest for us.

¹⁸ Cf. Bhattacharya's translation (Bhattacharya 1976: 210).

¹⁹ These are *binducyuta* (the dropping of the nasal phoneme changes the meaning of the verse), *mātracyuta* (dropping of the vowel sign), *prahelikā*, *kāraḡagūḡḡha* (grammatical puzzle – concealment of the subject), *kriyāgūḡḡha* (grammatical puzzle – concealment of the verb) and *praśnottara* (conundrum in which the same word answers several questions).

²⁰ The *Dhvanyāloka* 3.41-42 explains that *citra*, a creation of a poet but not subordinate to *rasas* (aesthetic emotions), is an imitation of poetry only.

²¹ Bhattacharya 1976: 166 (Sanskrit text), 211 (translation).

Agnipurāṇa, 342. 31

*anekadhāṣṭṭavarnavinyāsaḥ śilpakalpanā/
tattatprasiddhavastūnām bandha ityabhidhīyate //*²²

Creating the shape of different well-known objects
through the arrangement of letters repeated in various ways
is called *bandha*.

Later on the *bandhas* were also referred to as *citrabandhas* and understood as belonging to the *citra* type of poems, i.e. “figured poems”. The phenomenon of *citrakāvya* is of great importance for Indian culture although insufficiently studied so far.²³

The *nīyama*, literally “limitation poem”, involves the restrictions to the use of vowels and consonant classes. According to the *Agnipurāṇa* (Bhattacharya 1976: 166) those restrictions apply to the position (*sthāna*), vowel (*svara*) and consonant (*vyañjana*).

Kāvya-samasyā-pūraṇa

The *Agnipurāṇa* text mentions *samasyā*,²⁴ which is the same art known from the *Kāmasūtra* as *kāvya-samasyā-pūraṇa* (in other sources: *samasyā-pūraṇa* or *samasyā-pūraṇa-vidhi* or *samasyākhyāna*) as a kind of *prahelikā*.

This literary game requires the completion of a part of a stanza. As Sternbach mentions, the play is popular even nowadays among traditional Sanskritists and students of Sanskrit’ (Sternbach 1975: 78). He also reminds about the stories about Kālidāsa and his successful completing of the given *pāda* as described in the *Bhojaprabandha*.

²² Bhattacharya 1976: 166.

²³ Among scholars who contributed to the *citra* studies, the name of Siegfried Lienhard should be mentioned.

²⁴ *Agnipurāṇa*, 342. 27

*suśliṣṭapadyam ekaṃ yan nānāślokāṃśanirmitam /
sā samasyā parasyātmaparayo kṛtisaṃskaraṭ //*

“Successful” means, in accordance with the rules governing *kāvya* creation, spotless and not betraying double or triple authorship.

Pratimālā

Bibl. Jaq

Another literary game mentioned in the *Kāmasūtra* is *prati-mālā*. *Jayamaṅgalā* of Yaśodhara Indrapāda, a commentary on the *Kāmasūtra*, I. 3 reads:

*pratimāleti / yasyā antyākṣariketi pratītiḥ sā krīḍārthā vādārthā ca,
yathoktam -
pratiślokaṃ kramād yatra sandhāyākṣaram antimam /
paṭhetām ślokaṃ anyonyam pratimāleti soḍyata iti //*²⁵

Pratimālā – that one which is known as *antyākṣarika* (‘the last syllable play’) – is suitable for play and contest. As is said:

When in the sequence the next stanza is being recited starting with the last syllable of the preceding stanza, it is called pratimālā.

These literary games, although mentioned and classified by ancient Indian theoreticians of literature, were considered an inferior kind of poetical creativity. On the other hand, they served as a kind of test for a poet. A skilful and properly educated poet was expected to pass this test successfully.

This ancient literary game of *pratimālā* has its modern counterparts, known as *antyākṣari* it wins popularity all over India. By no means is it restricted to the Sanskrit medium, although it is quite popular among students of Sanskrit grammar: a student starts the Paninian *sūtra* with the last syllable of the *sūtra* just finished by his or her colleague. Such a tool as *antyākṣari* serves today as a means of testing the knowledge of Indian film songs.

There are also some other intellectual literary games characteristic of particular regions of India. To this group of still popular pastimes belongs *akṣaraśloka*, the social and cultural phenomenon typical of intellectual circles of Kerala described in our article: “If you know one

²⁵ Durgaprasad 1891: 37.

thousand śloka, you are half a poet: on the *akṣara-śloka* tradition of Kerala” in volume 7 of Cracow Indological Studies.

Andhra and/or Karnataka boast of being a cradle of another, more complex and sophisticated intellectual diversion called *aṣṭāvadhāna*. As one will be able to notice, some of the already mentioned ancient literary games form its parts.

II. Aṣṭāvadhāna as a historically and socially situated practice in epigraphic evidence

(by Cezary Galewicz)

Let me draw your attention to some epigraphic evidence of the historicity of the social institution of *avadhāna*, of which *aṣṭāvadhāna* seems to constitute a specific though apparently the best known variety. The evidence strongly suggests that *avadhāna* as a social institution must have not only belonged to a developed courtly literary culture. It must have also functioned as an important instrument of articulation for this culture. Its beginnings can be tentatively dated to the at least 12th/13th c. A.D. I failed to trace any mention of *avadhāna* or its performer (*Avadhāni*) in sources earlier than the thirteenth century A.D. Scanty as it is, the evidence indicates a rather wide spread of the concept judging by the fact that it is attested by inscriptions from the regions of operation of royal lineages such as the Hoysalas in Southern Deccan, the Kakatīyas in coastal Andhra and the Eastern Cālukyas in Kāthiyavar. These finds put in question the conviction of the contemporary performers that the art of *avadhāna* belonged originally to the vernacular traditions of Telugu and Andhra.²⁶ They point rather to yet another dynamic interplay between Sanskrit and vernacular literary traditions. This preliminary conclusion is corroborated by the contemporary practice of *avadhāna* in modern Telugu or Kan-

²⁶ Personal communication by Dr. R. Ganesh of Bangalore (2008), a prominent exponent of the contemporary art of *avadhāna*.

nada, which proves to be highly sanskritized. While only a minority of active *avadhāna* performers of contemporary Andhra or Karnataka undertake *avadhāna* in Sanskrit, a thorough grounding in Sanskrit literature, grammar and poetics is widely recognized to be a must for any Avadhāni who seeks true recognition by his peers and audiences. This must have been the case also in intellectual circles patronized by ambitious rulers across much of the cultural space of the southern half of the Indian Peninsula in the times when the North suffered from political dominance of the elites, that at least initially might have not appreciated indigenous forms of articulating political power through the medium of ornate epigraphic *praśasti* of courtly literati.

A Hoysala inscription of king Vīra Narasiṅha Hoysala II inscribed in the *navaraṅgamaṇṭapa* of the Narasiṅhadeva temple in Kēmbaḷu, the Hassan District, Karnataka, and dated to 1223, mentions his chief accountant by the name of Viśvanātha, a brāhmaṇa from Belvola, who was famed as a “performer of hundreds avadhānas (*avadhāna-śataṅga!*) and “could write with both hands, and perform a hundred avadhams ... so that the learned who examined him nodded their heads (in approval).”²⁷ He is also said to have obtained a copper royal order (*śāsana*) for a tax free land (*agrahāra*) from the king. In another stone inscription left by the same ruler, this very Viśvanātha is praised again as an “expert in writing with both hands” (*ubhaya-hasta-lekha-kuśala*) and this time also as an “emperor of *avadhāna*” or *avadhāna-cakravarttin*.²⁸ Apparently, a proficiency in the art of *avadhāna* must have been well recognized and highly prized since only such skills merited mention in royal inscriptions. A highly suggestive collocation of *avadhāna-cakravarttin* deserves perhaps a special attention, especially when juxtaposed as it is with a parallel pair where the same participle is coupled with the name of the political dominion of the Hoysalas: *hoysala-cakravarttin* as a formulation of prestige used for the king. The idea of a complementing nature of

²⁷ *Epigraphia Carnatica* 5: XXIV and 479-480.

²⁸ *Ibidem*: 384.

dominion over the intellectual and political realms seems more than obvious here and indicates power-knowledge relationship played upon in the concept of *avadhāna* virtuosos patronized by ambitious kings of the Deccan.

In his *Prabandhacaturviṃśati*, a Jaina author by the name of Rājaśekhara draws a sort of a portrait of an intellectual milieu composed of a circle of poets and literati patronized by king Visaladeva of the Cālukhya-Vāghela dynasty of the middle 13th century A.D. He claims one of them to be certain Vīśalanagarīya Nānāka.²⁹ Incidentally, an inscription dated to 1271 discovered in the Koteśvara Mahādeva Temple of Koinār, Gujarat, contains a regular *praśasti* eulogising apparently the same person. The hero of the *praśasti* is, among other things, said to be exceptionally versed in the art of Vedic recitation, having memorized the whole of the Ṛgveda as well as the ancillary *vedāṅgas*, and to have mastered grammar and the lore of drama, poetics, as well as epics and *purāṇas*. By the evidence of the *praśasti*, he seems to have been a veritable polymath.³⁰ However, it is the person of the author of the *praśasti* rather than its hero who is of greater importance for us here. In verse 36 of the *praśasti*, he is described as widely known in the world by the name of Bālasarasvatī, or New Sarasvatī – a name given to him by people whose [poetry loving] hearts had been overwhelmed by his [power] of eightfold concentration, or *aṣṭāvadhāna*. His autograph included in the *praśasti* confirms his name as Kṛṣṇa, a son of Ratna and a grandson of the author of the work called *Kuvalayāśvacarita*, thus indicating a family of professional literati:

*aṣṭāvadhanaparituṣṭahyā janānā
yaḥ kīrtito jagati bālasarasvatīti
pautrah kaviḥ kuvalayāśvacaritadhātuh
kṛṣṇaḥ praśastim iha ratnasutaḥ sa tene*³¹

²⁹ See Gadre 2007: 77.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 78.

³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 84.

This eulogy composed Kṛṣṇa, son of Ratna
and a poet grandson of the author of the Kuvalayāśvacarita.
He has been famed worldwide as New Sarasvatī
by people whose hearts were touched by his
[skills in the art of] *aṣṭāvadhāna*.

III. Rules and procedure

(by Cezary Galewicz)

As for the rules of *aṣṭāvadhāna* it should be noted that it looks like a spectacle,³² an event designed for a show-off, a claim to superiority and prestige, first and foremost for the major actor, i.e. the Avadhāni (a term in Kannada from Skt. *avadhānin*, ‘attentive’), but sometimes, secondarily also for those selected to act as questioning experts, or Pṛcchakas (from Skt. *pṛcchaka*, ‘questioner’, ‘interrogator’). The rules seem not to have changed since their description in a Kannada work by Kāma of the late 12th century as it is believed. As an event of that sort, the *avadhāna* must have required a patron and an audience by whom the patronizing initiative can be properly weighed and acknowledged.

The event is basically set on the stage where the Avadhāni meets a collective body of Pṛcchakas or examiners, so to say, to whose questions he is expected to react in a fine-grained literary as well as playful and entertaining way. The Pṛcchakas are nominated by the organizers and need to be persons of considerable recognition, well versed in literary traditions as well as general knowledge of the cultural heritage of the land.

The case of *aṣṭāvadhāna* takes eight Pṛcchakas, as its name suggests, and five rounds of Avadhāni’s performance, the final one being a recuperation, a resumé and a commentary on the previous four.

During a time limit that is said to be around three hours, the Avadhāni is supposed to answer to the clever questions of

³² A short description of a set of rules for the performance of *aṣṭāvadhāna* can be seen in Padmanabha Rao 2008: 20-23.

the Pṛcchakas in a way emphasizing his creative skills in poetry as well as his mastery of the acknowledged literary styles and textual traditions of his time and the literary culture(s) he belongs to or deems himself a master of. His answers are to take shape of one line of poetry at a time presented sequentially to each and every Pṛcchaka in four rounds. In the fifth round he is to recollect all the extempore composed verses and complete the ready-made stanzas with intellectual as well as playful commentaries and explanations. If his compositions prove to be more than literary gimmicks, they are going to find their place in the repertoire of reciters and connoisseurs, perhaps other Avadhānis too. During the four rounds, the Avadhāni composes six four-line stanzas in total under strict pre-given limitations and in response to questions and riddles posed by six out of eight Pṛcchakas. The eight interrogators work in eight areas to be selected from a traditional set of literary games named: *niṣedhākṣara* (composing verse on a given topic with syllables excluded for the choice on the way), *samasyāpūraṇa* (completing stanza with last line given), *datta-pāda* (composing stanza on a given topic with initial *akṣaras* of four lines given), *varṇana* (poetical description of a given topic with additional rules), *nyāstākṣara* or *vyastākṣara* (scattered/disjoined syllables of a stanza to be put to order in a new one with twelve syllables pre-given), *purāṇa-pāṭhana* (recitations from the *Purāṇas*) *aprastūta-prasaṅga* (unrelated talk by a person trying to distract Avadhāni from his concentration), *aśu-kāvitra* ('fast poetry' – composing a verse according to the Pṛcchaka's specifications, such as the use of a particular poetic figure or metre), *kāvyaavācana* (the Pṛcchaka recites a stanza from classical Sanskrit literature and the Avadhāni must supply the reference), etc. To that *ghanta-gāṇana* (counting the number of ring bells) or *puṣpa-tāḍana* (striking Pṛcchaka's back with a flower) should be added.

Customarily, the first one to come is the Pṛcchaka named Niṣedhākṣari, who engages with the Avadhāni in a dialog of limiting the latter's choice of *akṣaras* while composing a stanza on a given topic. The second comes *samasyā-pūraṇa* – the Pṛcchaka recites a concluding verse of a stanza the rest of which is to be supplied by

Avadhāni in succeeding rounds line by line and ended with a grammatical explanation of his choices. The fourth line given by Pṛcchaka usually expresses some paradox, seeming contradiction or an unusual thing to happen (Sīta married Śaṅkara). Third comes the Dattapādi, who gives four random words asking the Avadhāni to build around them a stanza on a particular topic. Next one comes the famous Aprastuta Prasāṅgi – the nuisance creating jester. The fifth one is Vyastākṣari, who is said to present Avadhāni with thirty-two or sixty-four syllables mixed altogether, asking him to arrange them into a regular and meaningful *śloka*. Then comes Nyastākṣari – a Pṛcchaka who presents the Avadhāni with a seemingly random set of *akṣaras* to be ordered into a meaningful verse corresponding and playfully relating to a given topic. The Pṛcchaka can also ask the Avadhāni to write a poem in a shape (*bandha*) of a lotus flower (*padma*) or a wheel (*cakra*), etc. To complete the picture we are said to imagine also the Avadhāni either playing chess with one more Pṛcchaka or counting the number of ring bells that come in between of his clever answers in verse to the Pṛcchakas' questions, all fashioned in style that appeals to the senses and gusto of the attentive audience.

While in principle the art of *avadhāna* may take several varieties, the *genus classicus* seems to be that of *aṣṭāvadhāna*. The others, however spectacular images may be suggested by their names, appear to remain somewhat artificial though instances of *śatāvadhāna* or *sahasrāvadhāna* are known from historical evidence as well as from contemporary practice. Contrary to expectations, they differ from the paradigmatic *aṣṭāvadhāna* not only in the number of Pṛcchakas.

IV. Portraits of famous Avadhānis

(by Lidia Sudyka)

There are opinions that the origins of the *avadhāna* could be connected with Vedic scholars and the performance was confined to questions and answers about the Vedas and training the memory necessary for

transmitting the lore of Vedas.³³ Later on the art of *avadhāna* covered poems written in Sanskrit, Telugu, Kannada and finally Tamil, and knowledge of the *alamkāraśāstra*, prosody, etc.

It is said that a poet Kāma living in the 12th century performed *avadhāna* in Kannada for the first time.

Another personage known as a virtuoso of *avadhāna* belonged to the family of a famous commentator Mallinātha Kolācala. According to the information noted in the S.V.U.O.R.I, Tirupati, Mss. No. 1281, his grandfather, also named **Mallinātha**, received honours from Vīrarudra (alias Pratāparudra, 1295-1323 AD) of Warangal:

*kolācalānvayādbhīnduḥ mallinātho mahāyaśāḥ śatāvadhānavikhyāto
vīrarudrābhivārṣitaḥ*³⁴

Renowned Mallinātha, the moon in the ocean of the Kolācala family, famous through his *śatāvadhāna*, was covered with a shower (of gold)³⁵ by Vīrarudra.

Bhaṭṭu Mūrṭi started his career at the court of Rāma Rāya (?- 1565) of the Aravidu dynasty of Vijayanagara Empire and earned himself the title of Rāma-Rāja-Bhuṣaṇa – ‘The gem of the court of Rāma Rāja’. His first known work is a manual on poetics. He wrote the *Vasu Charitra*, which belongs to the five great Telugu poems (*Pañca Kāvya*s).

Among the famous Avadhānis of yore, there were women, too. **Madhuravāṇī**, a poetess at the court of Raghunāthanāyaka of Tanjore (1600-1634), shows in her *Śrīrāmāyaṇasāra-kāvyaatilakam* the literary culture at his court. She gives such particulars about herself while closing the fifth canto:

³³ See: entry *Avadhanam* In: *The Encyclopaedia Of Indian Literature* (Datta 2006: 292, 293).

³⁴ Quoted after Narasimhacharya 2002: 5).

³⁵ So called *kanakābhiṣeka*.

*vīṇāvādakalāvinodasamayē dhṛtvā samasyāḥ śataṃ
sadyas saṃsadi sādhu pūrayati yā dattāḥ kavīndrais tayā /
devyoḍyanmatisakhyayā madhurāvanyambākhyaḥ nirmite
śrīrāmāyaṇasārakāvyaatilake sargo 'bhavat pañcamah' // V.111//³⁶*

This was the fifth canto in the *Śrīrāmāyaṇasārakāvyaatilaka* composed by the assistant/mistress of the One with intelligence elevated by divine powers (i.e. Raghunātha), named Madhuravāṇī, who at the time of the assembly, while simultaneously maintaining (her) entertaining art of playing the *vīṇā*, completes successfully a hundred of *samasyās* given by the best poets.

Evidently the performance of *śatāvadhāna* is alluded here. The other stanzas which close the *sargas* or some other present in canto I inform us about some other qualities of Madhuravāṇī, also indispensable to make a perfect Avadhāni.

*cāturyaṃ eti kavitāsu caturvidhāsu vīṇākalāprakaṭane bhavatī pravīṇā
/prajñāṃ iyaṃ nipuṇāṃ āncati pāṇinīye medhāṃ vyanakti bahudhā
vivīdhāvadhāne / 193³⁷*

She attains dexterity in the four types of poetry, being [also] skilful in demonstrating the art of playing the *vīṇā*. She manifests perfect knowledge of Pāṇini's grammar; she manifoldly displays mental power in various sorts of [activities requiring] attentiveness.

The art of *avadhāna* must have been popular among Jaina monks in mediaeval ages as there are mentions of several Jaina Avadhānis performing before Akbar and other Muslim rulers, who were impressed by their memory and power of concentration. It is said that **Siddhicandra**, a disciple of a famous Jaina monk Hīravijaya, was given the title *khush-faham* ('a man of sharp intellect')³⁸ because of his skills in *śatāvadhāna*.

³⁶ Ramaraju 1971: 64.

³⁷ Ramaraju 1971: 10.

³⁸ Mehta 1991: 99.

To this gallery of the virtuosos from the past a few names should be added:

Madabhushi Venkatacharya (1835–1895), a continuator and the inheritor of the old classic Telugu literary traditions; the author of old style *prabandhas*, such as the *Bharatabhyudayamu* or *Pushpabanivilasamu*. To this man, famous for his phenomenal memory, goes the credit of reviving the art of *avadhāna*. It was his example that inspired Tirupati Venkata Kavulu – the poetic duo:

Divakarla Tirupati Sastry (1872–1919) and **Chellapilla Venkata Sastry** (1870–1950). Besides their achievements as the playwrights and forerunners of modern poetry in Telugu, and the translators of Sanskrit literature into Telugu, they were renowned Śātāvadhānis, who performed at many royal courts and public places, creating “great enthusiasm and taste for the creation and appreciation of poetry”.³⁹

Rayaprolu Subba Rao (1892–1984), who came to be known as Abhinava Nannaya, the pioneer of the new school in Telugu literature, was not an advocate of the *avadhāna* tradition. According to him the poems composed spontaneously during the performance were lacking the real qualities of pure poetry and the *avadhāna* was only a kind of pastime which cannot aspire to go hand in hand with literary activity.

Despite such a poor evaluation of the influential poet and his followers, the *avadhāna* tradition seems to have continued up to the present days and still has its great exponents in Andhra and Karnataka; their admirers and the audience ready to attend the performance for hours.

Some of the Avadhānis are known as particularly skilful in certain types of creativity. For instance Dr. **Shankar Rajaraman**, a psychiatrist by profession, is an expert in *citrakāvya*, considered by some to be the most difficult part of the *avadhāna* contest. According to his

³⁹ See: entry *Avadhanam* In: *The Encyclopaedia of Indian Literature* (Datta 2006: 292).

account of this particular art, an Avadhāni mentally calculates (no pen and a piece of paper is allowed!) which syllables will be repeated and where, and then constructs a verse which suits a particular pattern (*bandha*)⁴⁰ for which he was asked.

Definitely one of the brightest stars in the galaxy of contemporary Avadhānis is Dr. **R. Ganesh** from Bangalore, who performs in Sanskrit, Prakrits, Kannada and Telugu with equal ease. For the first time we saw him in his library. A small room packed with thousand of books in several rows and piles on shelves, but their owner, a reserved and quiet man, knows very well where each of them stands. He quotes from memory hundreds of verses from different Sanskrit works, even those not very well known. Time passes so quickly in conversation with this unique erudite! Our next meeting took place in 2008 during an *avadhāna* performance in Bangalore. We saw a completely different person: a self-confident proudly smiling man dressed in pure white with a bright red scarf, around him a retinue of admirers. He visibly enjoyed the play with the *Ṗcchakas* finding the brilliant answers immediately, reciting poems in Sanskrit and Kannada appreciated by the audience. Perhaps we saw a picture from the glorious past of this now endangered art: the knowledgeable man, the passionate connoisseur of poetry blessed with imaginary as well as amazing memory and powers of concentration, which combination makes a virtuoso at play.

Conclusions

(by Lidia Sudyka & Cezary Galewicz)

Living forms of performative literary arts of South Asia defy description by a textual scholar. Most of their matter belongs to the event,

⁴⁰ Among popular *bandhas* described in different treatises on theory of literature and applied by the poets as well, there were lotuses with four, eight, ten, sixteen or more petals (always it has to be an even number of petals), a wheel (*cakra*), a drum (*muraja*), a club (*musala*), an arrow (*śara*) and many other objects visualized by a special arrangement of letters.

the moment, remains transitory even if some of the stanzas composed make their way into a wider repertoire of reciters or literary connoisseurs. They draw from and participate in literary cultures that much more depend on the experience of the performance. To label them with a term like “game”, “pastime divertimento” is half-truth at best if not an easy and cheap escape from a troublesome situation. The vivid protests on the part of participants to do so seem to confirm it. If we are to use the name of “game”, then the only reasonable choice is that of the perspective of cultural studies, such as those continuing ideas of Johan Huizinga or cultural anthropology admitting a vital role of collective games and gaming for men and humanity.

As for the connection link to the topic of the present volume, we would like to point that there are reasons to believe that much of the evidence deserving the denomination of literary evidence in the proper sense is usually strongly marked by literary conventions that make one extremely cautious when judging their direct socio-historical relevance, which of course is not the same as judging their value for reconstructing socio-historical context. In our believe the case of *avadhāna* represents a rare opportunity to peep inside the very practice of one of the most important social institutions of courtly intellectual life, an institution of importance not only for the history of literature but also for social and cultural historians interested in mutual interplay between political power and intellectual life: the institution of *avadhāna* found an important place in royal inscriptions, proving itself to be one of the channels for articulating political power by underwriting it with proud announcements by the kings patronizing the best selection of intellectuals. Also Sanskrit literature attests to the *avadhāna* presence at the kings’ courts. This play with words, sounds and images, although despised by some of the ancient theoreticians of literature, perhaps was not evoking aesthetic emotions as described by Ānandavardhana, but turned out to fulfil emotional needs of the performers aspiring to recognition as well as the recipients awaiting their share in the process of the rise of a virtuoso. Of course economical reasons on the part of a poet looking for patronage and political ones on the part of a patron striving

for power and authority should be stressed even more. In that way the interests of three parties taking part in this particular *kāvya-goṣṭhi*, as one can label the performance of *avadhāna*, enabled this institution longevity. Also today we can point out three groups of factors responsible for the continuity of the tradition of *avadhāna* performances. These are: 1. Cementing regional identity – the *avadhānas* performed in Telugu, Kannada and Tamil; the appearance of Sanskrit can stress the link with the glorious past. 2. Collective participation in the social and cultural event valued as educative and intellectual entrainment – a proof of good education of participants, who gain the sense of nobilitation besides amusement and interactions with other viewers. 3. Individual needs of a performer, both emotional and intellectual ones.

References

- Bhattacharya, S. M. (1976). *The Alamkāra-Section of the Agni-purāṇa*. Critically Edited with an Introduction, English translation and notes by Suresh Mohan Bhattacharyya. Calcutta.
- Böhtlingk, O. (1890). *Daṇḍin's Poetik (Kāvyaḍarśa)*, Sanskrit und deutsch hrsg. von O. Böhtlingk. Leipzig.
- Datta, A. (2006). Entry *Avadhanam*. In: *The Encyclopaedia of Indian Literature*. Vol. 1 (A to Devo). Sahitya Akademi: 292-293.
- Durgaprasad. (1891). *Kāmasūtram yaśodharaviracitayā jayamaṅgalākhyayā ṭikayā sametam*. Mumbai: Nirmayasāgara.
- Durgaprasad. (1886). *The Kāvyaḷankāra (A Treatise on Rhetoric) of Rudrata*, with the Sanskrit Commentary of Namisādhū. Ed. by Paṇḍita Durgāprasāda and Kāshinātha Pāṇḍuranga Paraba. Bombay.
- Epigraphia Carnatica*, Vol. 5. Ed. by L. Rice (1902). Mangalore: Basel Mission Press

- Galewicz, C.; Sudyka, L. (2005). If you know one thousand *śloka*-s, you are half a poet: On the *akṣara śloka* traditions of Kerala. In: *Cracow Indological Studies*. Vol. 7. Ed. by L. Sudyka: pp. 295-315.
- Gadre, A.S. (2007 repr. of 1935 edition). *Important inscriptions from Baroda State*. Vol. 1. Bronson Press.
- Gerow, E. (1971). *A Glossary of Indian Figures of Speech*. The Hague/Paris.
- Ingalls, D. H. H.; Masson, J. M. & Patwardhan, M. V. (1990). Transl. *The Dhvanyāloka of Ānandavardhana*, With the *Locana* of Abhinavagupta. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- Jha, K. (1975). *Figurative Poetry in Sanskrit Literature*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
- Krishnamoorthy. K. (Second Edition 1982). *Dhvanyāloka of Ānandavardhana, Critically edited with Introduction, Translation & Notes by Dr. K. Krishnamoorthy*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
- Lienhard, S. (1996). Text-Bild-Modelle der klassischen indischen Dichtung. In: *Nachrichten der Akademie der Wissenschaften in Göttingen, I. Philologisch – Historische Klasse*, Nr. 2, Göttingen: 29-54.
- Lienhard, S. (1997). Martial Art and Poetics. Some More Observations on *Citrakāvya*. In: *Lex et Litterae. Studies in Honour of Professor Oscar Botto*. Ed. Lienhard Siegfried & Piovano Irma. Alessandria: Edizioni dell'Orso, pp. 343-359.
- Malamoud, Ch. (2002). Les contours de la mémoire dans l'Inde brahmanique. In: Editions de l'EHESS, *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 5: 151-162.
- Mehta, M. (1999). *Indian Merchants and Entrepreneurs in Historical Perspective*. Delhi: Academic Foundation.
- Naganatha Sastry, P. V. (reprinted 1991). *Kāvyaṭāṅkāra* of Bhāmaha ed. with English translation and notes by P. V. Naganatha Sastry. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
- Narasimhacharya, N.C.V. (2002). *Mallinātha – A Study*, Rashtriya Sanskrit Vidyapeetha. Tirupati.
- Padmanabha Rao, R. A. (2008). Art of Ashtavardhana. In: Padmanabha Rao, R.A. *Avadhāna Vidvanirkavaram*. Tirupati, pp. 20-23.

- Pažucha, K. (2010). King Bhoja of Dhāra and His Court, as Described in Ballāla's *Bhojaprabandha*. In: *The City and the Forest in Indian Literature and Art*. Ed. by Danuta Stasik & Anna Trynkowska. Warszawa: Elipsa, pp. 69-77.
- Pollock, S. (2006). *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men. Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India*. University of California Press.
- Pollock, S. (ed.) (2003). *Literary Cultures in History: Reconstructions from South Asia*. University of California Press.
- Pratapa Venkateshwara Kavi. (1927). *Avadhana mañjarī*.
- Raghavan, V. (1979). *Festivals, Sports and Pastimes of India*. Ahmedabad: B. J. Institute of Learning and Research.
- Rai, G. S. (2000). (4th ed.). *Kāvya-mīmamsa of Rajaśekhara*. Edited with 'Prakāśa' Hindi Commentary. Varanasi: The Vidyabhawan Sanskrit Granthamala 121, Chowkhamba Vidyabhawan.
- Rāḷlabaṇḍi, K. (2006). *Avadhāna vidya, ārambha vikāśālu*, Varāṅgallu: Sahṛdaya Sāhitya Saṁskṛtika Saṁstha.
- Ramaraju, B. (ed.) (1972). *Śrīrāmāyaṇasāra Kāvya Tilakam* by Madhuravāṇī. Hyderabad: Andhrapredesh Sahitya Akademi, Dakshina Bharat Press.
- Rao, N. V. (2003). Multiple literary cultures in Telugu: court, temple and public. In: *Literary Cultures in History: Reconstructions from South Asia*. Ed. by Sheldon Pollock. University of California Press, pp. 383-436.
- Rao, N. V., Shulman, D. (1998). *A Poem at the Right Moment. Remembered verses from premodern South India*. Collected and tr. by V. Narayana Rao and David Shulman. University of California Press.
- Sharma, T. R. S. (ed.) (2000) *Ancient Indian Literature. An Anthology*. Vol. 2. Delhi: Sahitya Akademi.
- Sircar, D. C. (1965). *Indian Epigraphy*. Delhi.
- Sternbach, L. (1975). *Indian Riddles. A Forgotten Chapter in the History of Sanskrit Literature*. Hoshiarpur: Vishveshvaranand Vedic Research Institute.

- Sternbach, L. (1976). Samasyā's and Other Games of Skill in Ancient India.
In: *Wissenschaftliche Zeitschrift der Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin*,
Ges.-Sprachw. XXV (1976) 3: 367-369.
- Subbanna Shathavadhani, C. V. (1987). *Avadhana vidya*.
- Venkata Rajamu, A. (1995). *Avadhanapadyamanjari (collection of ashtavadhana poems)*. Koratla.